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ABSTRACT

A proposal was presented at Regional Child Welfare League of America Conference, Totonto, March 1973 which claims that the majority of issues, tasks and problems in foster care and adoption are similar and that family life, whether original, foster or adoptive, is essentially the same. The author contends that adoption agencies must take on an expanded role in providing homes for children who need them. He recommends that informational meetings be established on a community-wide basis with agencies, parent groups and experienced families participating. Then, prospective parents who express a desire could meet in Child-Family Seminars with agency social workers and "seasoned" families. After it places children, the agency must be prepared to offer support and follow-up services to adoptive and foster families as long as they need it. (HMV)

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A PROPOSED FOSTER & ADOPTIVE FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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A PROPOSED FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In the 70's, as in other times, the main problem of foster care and adoption programs remains the same; children wait for families. Questions of finding families for special children, the challenge of developing them once they have been found, and the ever present dilemma of keeping programs adjusted to constantly changing needs and demands are neither new nor unique to the contemporary situation. What is new, unique and forever changing, however, is the body of empirical knowledge based on growing experience and understanding of human behavior and need. We, in children's services, must never for a moment be satisfied with the so called "Tried and True" attitude toward delivery of services simply because what was seemingly true and acceptable in the past may have little, if any, relevance to a current problem. We are morally bound to explore and identify new solutions to current situations. This method of resolution requires that we build from the past through identifying fundamental values and truths and relating them to today's knowledge, experience and needs.

In this presentation, I shall attempt to identify a philosophical and modual foundation from which dynamic and responsive foster and adoption study, placement and follow-up services may be developed. This, hopefully, will be achieved through an examination of what can be done to bring the tasks of foster care and adoption together on a single foundation from which the goal of permanency may be pursued. To achieve this end it is hoped that we may:

1. Establish a willingness to relate what we are doing to what we might do to strengthen services to children.

2. Explore ways of modifying methods of recruitment, study, and placement services.

3. Share a proposed process for strenthened delivery of foster care and adoption services.

The philosophical foundation for foster care and adoption services is I believe, the generally accepted concept that society at large is vested with the ultimate responsibility for safeguarding all children. All children's services exist to help assure that each child has the opportunity of developing a positive self image which helps in growth to a mature contributing adulthood. This should be provided in each child's original family but when this is not possible then other alternatives must be utilized. This encompasses the very broad, and if you will awesome, task of providing loving care which will assure a healthy and secure adulthood. In addition to a loving encouraging, trusting, stimulating, predicatable and organized environment, this includes the provision of food, shelter, clothing,

health services, supervision and educational opportunities. Ordinarily, these are provided in each child's original family setting. Unfortunately for some children, this is not possible and social agencies provided by society are called upon to supplement and augment them through the provision of foster care while the child is temporarily out of the home and adoption services for those who have been permanently renewed from their original family. Society's assumption of this responsibility for its children clearly places the child in the central position as primary recipient of these services. Therefore, in the delivery of foster care and adoption services, the child must always be viewed as our major concern. Foster and adoptive families, assisted by the agency, are providers of these services to children entrusted into their care and all activities engaged in are focused upon executing society's responsibility to the child. In support of this position there are several basic assumptions that need to be identified and agreed upon before proceeding into more detailed discussion. It is difficult, and sometimes unfair, to rank these assumptions according to priority. For purposes of this presentation it is necessary, however, and I shall attempt:

1. All children possess innate beauty as individual human beings with capacity to return as well as receive love.

2. The child is always our primary client in foster care and adoption services.

3. Our ultimate responsibility to the child is a healthy and secure adulthood resulting from constructive, goal directed childhood experiences.

4. The basic needs of children are universal regardless of the status of the child.

5. The fundamental need for commitment to children by parents and society at large is universal.

6. Certain generic skills are necessary for parenting all children, however for some, certain other skills, talents and attributes are necessary.

7. The goal of foster family care is preparation. Preparation of the child for permanency; preferably return to the original family.

8. The goal of adoption is the development of a permanent family for a child whose original family may no longer provide a home for him.

9. All foster care and adoptive applicants possess basic goodness, honesty, integrity and the overwhelming majority posess the capacity to parent some child.

10. The foster care or adoptive applicant is a secondary client whose role it is to serve the child.

11. The function of the agency is that of both provider of direct service and facilitator of service to the child.

12. The agency and the foster or adoptive family enter into a shared and ongoing relationship in providing services to children.

Let us assume that all agencies have children entrusted to their care for whom foster care and adoptive homes are needed. This is, I believe you will agree, almost always a chronic situation. It is also a safe assumption that children never go without care although that which we are able to provide is frequently not the type which we believe in our hearts to be the best for the needs of certain children. A question, of major significance, I believe is "how may we establish a program for foster or adoptive family development which is responsive to the needs of children for whom we are seeking homes?".

In response to that question I am proposing a family development program which is generic in nature. This proposal is based upon the recognition that the majority of issues, tasks and problems in foster care and adoption are similar and that family life, whether it be original, foster, or adoptive family, is essentially the same. The goal of family life as stated earlier, is a healthy and secure adulthood. The tactics for achieving that goal varies according to the needs of the individual child, however. The goal of a family development program is finding, preparing, assisting, and stimulating growth in families offering their homes to children.

One method for developing such a program is reminding ourselves that the philosophical foundation for either foster care or adoption is the protection of children; the purpose of foster family care is preparation and assisting in the transition to a permanent family; and the purpose of adoption is the development of a permanent family for a child whose original family is no longer able to provide a home for him. Next, we must recognize that almost all families approaching an agency for either foster care or adoption may have many common questions on their mind, and come to us with some degree of fear, mystery and trepidation. In designing a family development program we must anticipate these questions and concerns and address ourselves to them in every conceivable manner. Those that come to mind are:

What if we are disapproved?
What do we have to do to get approved?
What do we have to know to get approved?
How much does it cost?
How are we going to have to change to be approved?
What questions should we ask?
Were we accepted?
Is it safe to express our own ideas?
Are we normal?
What are we suppose to say about their "real" parents?
What does a social worker really do?
Where does the agency fit into the picture?
Who decides which child comes to our home?

How much will they tell us about him? Will it be the truth?
What if we cannot handle the child?
What if we have to go to court?
What happens after the child is placed?
What happens if the child is removed?
What if we run into trouble?
How do we really know this is right for us?

Responding to these and many other concerns becomes the task of the agency before, during and after recruitment, study and placement. It is an ongoing process which must be founded on a very sound relationship of trust, mutual respect and free dialogue between the family and agency. Let me suggest a process through which I believe an efficacious program which establishes this kind of relationship and leads ultimately to a shared responsibility between the foster and adoptive families and agency may be established.

Recruitment programs may be carried out through numerous means such as radio, television, newspapers, foster and adoptive family groups, billboards, posters, organization and person to person contact, public speaking and, certainly, through other methods not mentioned here. The main focus of generic family recruitment should be to interest families in children needing them. Neither foster care nor adoption should be stressed in particular. Rather, families should be urged to contact the agency to discuss children needing them with the option of foster care or adoption left open until much further discussion, thinking and evaluating has taken place.

Community Information meetings may be established on a community wide basis with several agencies, parent groups and experienced families participating. All respondents to organized recruitment and families inquiring about either foster care or adoption to any one of the participating agencies would be referred to a community information meeting. These meetings may be designed in one of two ways:

1. Each participating agency and group may make a presentation describing their foster care and adoption programs and telling the attendants of current needs. Following these presentations each agency is assigned a location where respondents may learn more about its program and needs. Families would be invited to choose an agency of their choice and to enter into the study of foster care and adoption in a Child-Family Seminar with that agency.

2. The agenda and content of community information programs would be developed through the efforts of all participating agencies and groups designed to describe the community program and needs in general. Such type of program would then be followed by a community sponsored Child-Family Seminar with referral to a specific agency delayed until completion of the Seminar.

Child-Family Seminar groups of 8 to 10 prospective parents and a minimum of 2 social workers, assisted by at least one "seasoned" foster or adoptive family are recommended. The tone of these seminars should be a free exchange

of ideas and information about what it is like to be a parent and more particularly to parent a foster or adopted child. As seminar staff presents information and stimulate discussion, participants would be encouraged to express their ideas, attitudes and experiences on the various issues. This assists in the integration of knowledge by families and helps staff to learn about them. It also encourages all participants to learn from each other and to begin learning how to share and grow from discussing experiences and problems with other families.

Parenting is essentially a set of attitudes rather than a comprehensive body of knowledge and topics for discussion in Child-Family Seminars are limitless. An attempt to list them individually would be to suggest that advance knowledge of what might be introduced at any seminar ever to be held is at hand. The more conservative and safer, although less satisfying, alternative of generalization shall be used in this instance. Three major areas will be commented upon.

1. Needs of Children have been identified earlier as a need for a loving, encouraging, stimulating, trusting, predictable and organized environment which provides food, shelter, clothing, health services, supervision and educational opportunities which will prepare the child for a healthy and secure adulthood. Children in the care of agencies have certain other needs which, while potentially present in all children are exaggerated in agency children.

   The trauma of separation brought about by removal from their original family causes deep problems with our children and expresses itself in a multitude of ways. Ways which are frequently bewildering and sometimes debilitating to foster and adoptive families. Another need which is exaggerated in children removed from their original family is that of identity. Mankind seems to have an inborn need for continuity between the past and the present in his life and this continuity has been broken in the young lives of our children. The need for foster and adoptive families to allow children to develop and maintain this link with the past so that they may realistically relate themselves to the present is of paramount importance.

   A great many children needing families have special needs over and above those of fear, separation and identity problems. Frequently, they are seriously handicapped, either emotionally, physically or mentally and sometimes they are handicapped because of age, size of family and other problems.

2. Parenting, in order to be successful, requires the ability to make an adult commitment to a child which is firmly anchored upon a conscious decision as opposed to an action stimulated by an emotionally inspired feeling. It requires the ability and willingness to make that commitment before one knows what the future holds and to hold to that commitment regardless of what happens. This asks a great deal of any parent. The one advantage that foster and adoptive families have is that the agency is in a position to offer help, if and when it is needed.

In order for parents to offer a secure and consistant environment, they must have a certain level of adult maturity and emotional as well as marital and financial stability.

Perhaps the special requirements of foster and adoptive parents is that of understanding what may be unusual behavior demonstrated by children with separation and identity problems, and dealing with unfamiliar handicaps. It also requires more than the usual amounts of compassion tact, tolerance and ability to build from precious few good experiences.

3. Agency-Family Relationship is a broad area which must be elaborated upon in detail during the Child-Family Seminar and which must be an ongoing relationship. In the foster family situation, this lasts for as long as the child is in the home and in adoption this relationship should last for as long as the family and the agency mutually agree upon its necessity.

In the process of the Child-Family Seminar, families may rediscover much of what they already knew about children's needs and parenting. Usually they will learn things about these two subjects as well as about themselves which they had not previously considered. They are also in a position of learning about children needing families, their capacities, special needs, skills, unique parenting requirements, and what is involved in the process of foster care and adoption. While families are learning this, the agency is in the position of learning relevant, appropriate and in-context information about their parenting capacities and limitations, expectations, likes, dislikes, tolerances, aspirations, talents, life style, self-concept and family needs.

Through this shared dialogue in the seminar, the agency is able to provide sufficient information to the family so they may be enabled to enter into intelligent decision making related to themselves and children. As the process evolves, the agency and the family are, hopefully, able to reach a mutual decision regarding foster care or adoption and the type of child appropriate for placement with the family.

Selection, Placement and the Future of children with families who have been through the Child-Family Seminars may not significantly vary from those who have been involved in another process. However, through this process we have established an open, free and trusting collegial relationship of entering into foster care or adoption together.

If the agency is comfortable with the decision that has been reached regarding program and type of child that the family can best serve, it follows that they should have little problem selecting a child, provided there is one waiting. Consistent with acceptable practice

it's expected that the agency has comprehensive knowledge of the child and is prepared to share all relevant and necessary information for parenting the child with the family. Further, it is consistent with previous understanding that the agency spare no effort to support the family in parenting the child for as long as the plan is in the best interest of the child. This strongly suggests, in fact requires, that in adoption placement as well as foster care, the agency be prepared to offer support and follow-up services to families for as long as they are needed.

I believe that there are numerous advantages to a generic foster and adoptive family development program; some obvious and others not. The proposed study and shared relationship between family and agency provides a dimension to these programs that is frequently obscured or rejected; it provides a system for families to learn about both programs and themselves, thereby enabling them and the agency to make sound decisions regarding the constructive use of their talents; it provides for further development of the family so that they may be able to offer more extensive services to children as their talents increase; it delays program selection until families have had the opportunity to study the general issues and select with the agency which area they are best suited for, it sets the stage for families to enter into future sharing sessions with other families and agency staff and finally; it provides an established method for continued relationship and growth by the family for so long as they choose to exercise the option.

Three common definitions of the word "develop" are:

1. Bring out capabilities;

2. Bring to a more advanced or effective state;

3. Cause to grow or expand.

I believe that this proposed program for foster and adoptive family development which is responsive to the needs of children meets the criteria of these definitions and, further, that it is a program which recognizes the dignity of, and gives due credit to, prospective families from the time they first contact the agency until they discontinue their relationship for whatever reason.

I believe that we need to keep ever present in our mind the understanding that parenting children who come under agency care involves a great deal of nurturing growth in difficult soil, encouraging, supplementing and supporting children who bring painful memories with them, and that the most basic ingredient to parenting our children is a capacity and willingness to become a part of the healing and growth process. Our responsibility and that of foster or adoptive families is a heavy one of a shared concern and responsibility which can be experienced only through the establishment of a trusting relationship in which there is open and free sharing of information, shared decision making, and most importantly, a shared future.